



CAPTivations

Success Stories in Prevention

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Teen Art Explosion - Arkansas

The YouthCAN! coalition in Benton and Washington counties in far northwest Arkansas is using art to reach youth at risk of using drugs and alcohol—and getting some amazing results.

"I've had one boy whose parents were divorced, and he had gotten on the wrong track," explains Barbara Price Davis, executive director of YouthCAN!. "He's now graduated and in the Navy in their religious program. He wants to be a youth minister and run a youth program, just like the one I am running."

The area in northwest Arkansas that

YouthCAN! covers is diverse with parts that are both rural and somewhat urban.

Fayetteville, Bentonville, and Springdale are all included in the program, with a total of 80,000 homes in these cities. Approximately 30 percent of the population is Hispanic, and a wide range of socio-economic groups are represented.

Fayetteville is sports oriented because the University of Arkansas is located there. Because of Fayetteville's academic community, the city also claims a thriving arts and culturally diverse community.

Fayetteville is also home to the company headquarters of Wal-Mart, JB Hunt trucking company, and Tyson Chicken, so the area has plenty of jobs.

A statewide Department of Health study of youth risk behavior showed that marijuana use was the most significant problem drug. In the region where Benton and Washington counties are located, drug use is among the lowest in the state until 10th grade, but then drug use jumps to the highest in the state for 10th through 12th graders.

"There are lots of theories about that," Davis observes. "One is that they get their driver's licenses then, and they get some freedom and independence. Also . . . there are not a lot of activities outside of sports, and boredom leads to unhealthy choices."

The primary focus of YouthCAN! is its Teen Art Explosion, which is held in the area's three alternative high schools: Fayetteville West Campus, Springdale Night School, and Rogers Extended Day School. The program is funded by a Drug Free Community Support Program grant

from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, which YouthCAN! received in the fall of 1999.

The idea to use art as a way to reach the students in the alternative school came from Frank Taylor, the principal at Rogers Extended Day School. He saw that many of his students had experimented with drugs, and he had seen from working in Texas that art could be used as a way to intervene and work with kids who were using drugs or were at risk for using drugs. He asked students what class they wanted to take if

they could take any class they wanted, and the majority said they wanted art.

He brought the idea to Jim Smith, the prevention resource coordinator in Region One, where Benton and Washington counties are located. Smith helped write the grant that made

the Teen Art Explosion possible.

In the program, professional artists teach the class, "with passion and an idea on how to make this a vocation," Davis said. "They show the kids how to do it and challenge them on how to use art as an expressive tool."

The students take tests and receive grades, but they also focus on projects to help their schools and the community. For example, Davis points out that they have made murals focusing on the diversity of their schools, and have completed such community service projects as making pillows for a preschool serving kids in foster care. They've also made puppets for a Head Start program and a tie-dyed quilt for a women's shelter.

When Davis came on board in October 2000, she saw that most of the students in the program were on probation, had been on probation, or had otherwise been in the juvenile justice system. Most of the kids she had

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talked to said they started getting in trouble in seventh and eighth grade, and they got in trouble over the summer. Therefore, she started a summer Teen Art Explosion program to address this concern.

In addition to the art lessons, the students also participate in various team building games, and even get to take a ropes course at the end of the year.

The summer program provided jobs for the older students in the school-year teen art program, who served as mentors, or "teen leaders," assisting the professional artists in working with the younger students.

"These kids have few vocational skills and social skills," Davis explains. "This gives them skills and gives them an opportunity, for 15 of them, to learn these skills."

To be a teen leader, the students must pass a drug test and undergo extensive training, Davis states. They are given policies and procedures and

role play different scenarios on how to handle various situations that might come up with the younger students. They learn what

information should be kept in confidence and what they need to report to the adults.

The older students teach what they have learned in the classroom. Davis said she loves hearing the older students tell the 13-15-year-olds enrolled in the summer program that "there's no such thing as bad art."

The younger students in the summer program learn about more than just art. They also learn about life and communication skills, with role-playing during snack time, for example, to learn the difference between assertiveness and aggression.

One of the highlights of the summer is a field trip to a nearby lake, which many of the kids have never had the chance to visit. The students go with disposable cameras, and they get lessons on how to frame pictures and use lighting to get the best photographs.

The trip is about more than a photography lesson, Davis

said. The students also get to swim, eat watermelon, and have a good time. At the end of the summer is an art show and sale, including a silent auction of the students' work.

Davis said she has seen some phenomenal changes in some of the students. One young man in the school-year Teen Art Explosion program had overdosed, and she had told him she would miss him if he were to leave this world. When the summer came around, he wasn't eligible to be a teen mentor for the younger kids in the summer program, because he admitted to smoking pot, but Davis made him her personal assistant. However, he soon announced he had quit smoking pot and was off all drugs. "He had been wearing all black and had a Mohawk," Davis said. "By the end of the summer, he had shaved the Mohawk and started wearing colors." The young man eventually pulled his grades up and became a teen leader.

Not long afterward, one of his works of art was accepted at a local art show, and he won a prize and sold his work.

However, unlike the school Teen Art Explosion program, the summer program was not funded by the grant, but by community and corporate donations. For the summer of 2003, YouthCAN! was unable to get the necessary funds, and the program was

cancelled for the year.

The summer 2002 students were given pre- and post-tests by Dr. Ronna Turner at the University of Arkansas. They were tested on drug usage, attitudes toward school and community, attitudes toward delinquency, attitudes toward sexism, future academic plans, attitudes toward adults, and self esteem. Of the 40 students who started the program, 35 completed it.

The 35 who took both the pre-test and post-test reported greater feelings of connection within the program and the larger community, and an increased sense of responsibility for the local community. They reported lower levels of acceptance of such delinquent behavior as cheating, fighting, stealing, and lying to parents. They showed a slight increase in interest in graduating from high school and obtaining post-graduate training and education. Only four students had reported using drugs at the start of the program, and none reported using drugs during the program.

With these statistics and a pocketful of success stories, Davis said she hopes not only to resume funding for the summer program in 2004, but to expand it to an after school program in August 2004.



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Center for Substance Abuse Prevention
www.samhsa.gov/centers/csap/csap.html

Decision Support System
www.preventiondss.org

Join Together
www.jointogether.org

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America
www.cadca.org

CSAP's Model Programs
<http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov>

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